

Senator BROWN has charted his own path in his short time here in the Senate, and I expect the ventures he undertook while serving here will continue. I wish him and his family the best.

#### THANKING LUTHERAN CHURCH CHARITIES

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, this past week we have all watched, grief-stricken, the terrible school shooting in Newtown, CT, and the heart-breaking funerals of those beautiful little children. There are no words to adequately express our sorrow for those touched by this tragedy. But there is an organization that is helping to bring comfort and healing to Newtown in a way that requires no words.

One day after the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School, a group of golden retrievers from the Chicago area made a cross-country journey to provide solace to the Newtown community. The Lutheran Church Charities sent five of their "comfort dogs" to help console grieving family members and others touched by the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Accompanying these special dogs are handlers who are trained to speak or pray with mourners or simply to sit quietly with them.

In all, nine comfort dogs from Lutheran Church Charities have helped to comfort Newtown residents. Some of these remarkable dogs attended President Obama's speech at an interfaith gathering at Newtown High School, another comforted mourners at Newtown's Christ the King Lutheran Church, the location of funerals for two of the slain children. The dogs even made an appearance on CNN with host Don Lemon.

This is how Tim Hetzner, president of Lutheran Church Charities, explained the dogs' healing powers: "Dogs are nonjudgmental," he says, "They are loving. They are accepting of anyone. It creates the atmosphere for people to share."

That is exactly what they have done in Newtown.

A woman visiting a Newtown memorial told one reporter: "It's a very solemn time. With the dogs here, it seems like it's a little ray of sunshine."

A child from Newtown said simply that the dogs "help you get over how sad it is."

Sadly, the comfort dog program began after another gun tragedy. In 2008, after a gunman killed five students at Northern Illinois University, a group of dog caretakers associated with Lutheran Church Charities visited the NIU campus in hopes of offering a healing distraction to students. The trip was so successful that a few weeks later students petitioned university leaders to bring the comfort dogs back.

The initiative has since grown from a handful of dogs in the Chicago area to 60 dogs in 6 states. Comfort dogs have traveled across the Nation to console

people in the aftermath of major tragedies such as Hurricane Sandy and the tornado that hit Joplin, MO.

When the K-9 comfort dogs are not responding to a tragedy, they visit people in hospitals, nursing homes, and parks. Each dog has a Facebook page, Twitter account, and email so those who meet the dogs can keep in touch.

The unconditional love of comfort dogs has helped countless children and adults to cope with tragedy and begin to heal from their suffering. On behalf of a heartbroken but grateful Nation, I want to express my heartfelt thanks to all of the comfort dogs of Lutheran Church Charities especially Abbi, Barnabas, Chewie, Chloe, Hannah, Luther, Prince, Ruthie, and Shami—and to their handlers.

I yield the floor.

#### TRIBUTE TO CHRIS COWART

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I rise to pay tribute to a staff member of the Senate Armed Services Committee who will be retiring at the end of this session of Congress. Her name is Christine Cowart, and for the past 6 years, she has served as the Chief Clerk of the Committee. She had previously served a term of 8 years as Chief Clerk under Senator Sam Nunn.

I know that 14 years sounds like a lot of time to most people, but that barely scratches the surface of Chris' service to the Senate. In fact, Chris holds a special place in the record books. In an organization like the Senate, known for some long-serving members, Chris would fall within the top ten list of longevity for senators, and no member currently serving has been here in the Senate longer than Chris.

The mere fact that she will be completing almost 41 years of service to the Senate is truly a remarkable accomplishment, especially in today's world where changing jobs has become the norm. And if that were all of her record, that would be amazing. But that is only part of the story. Chris made invaluable contributions to getting each of 41 of the 51 total National Defense Authorization Acts we have done annually since 1961. As Chief Clerk, it was her duty to shepherd the Armed Services Committee's annual set of hearings, meetings, and briefings that lead up to the DOD Authorization Act each year. Her duties also included showing the ropes to new senators and new staffers alike.

Chris took to heart the ideals of service she dedicated almost all of her adult life to service to her country and to the Senate. I remember Chris recounting how her father had escorted her here to the Russell Senate Office Building for her first interview with the Committee in the summer of 1972, shortly after she graduated from college. She said she didn't have any difficulty in deciding what to do after her father told her, "Take the job."

Chris' father was a career Navy man, having flown maritime patrol aircraft

for the Navy during World War II and thereafter. He instilled in Chris the value of patriotism and service to country that she so exemplifies in her life.

During her service to the Committee, she served as mentor, confidant and advisor to the staff as they experienced weddings, divorces, births and deaths.

Chris has been a rock for the Committee, and I know I speak for all of the members and staff when I say, "Chris, thank you for your service to the Armed Services Committee, to the Senate and to the country. You have set a standard of dedication and professionalism for all of us, and we will miss you!"

#### BALANCED BUDGET

Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. President, I rise today to discuss our Nation's need to adopt a balanced budget amendment and to bring the Senate's attention to the Alabama Legislature's recent call for Congress to send such an amendment to the States for ratification. This is a thoughtful and well-reasoned resolution. Many other States have made similar resolutions. Our Nation is on the precipice of the most predictable fiscal disaster in our history and Congress has failed to act to remove the danger. U.S. gross Federal debt is now over \$16.3 trillion; U.S. debt per person is over \$53,000, higher than that of Greece; and for the fourth straight year, our Nation's deficit will exceed \$1 trillion. The Federal Government cannot continue spending more than it takes in, and the people of Alabama clearly know that.

The American people understand the necessity of living within one's means and balancing budgets. We see that as American families across the Nation are working to pay off their debt. In fact, American families have improved their balance sheets by reducing their outstanding credit card debt by 17 percent since 2008, over \$150 billion. The people expect no less of their State governments. Forty-three of the 50 States, including my home State of Alabama, have balanced budget requirements.

Unfortunately, as States and families across the Nation cut spending and balance budgets, the Federal Government continues to spend more and has increased its debt by more than \$4 trillion since 2008. This spending course will at some point wreck our economy, just as it has wrecked that of Greece, Spain, and Italy. Now, more than ever, it is crucial that Congress adopt a balanced budget amendment and send it to the States for ratification. The surging debt crisis we face is so significant that we must have a balanced budget constitutional amendment. It has come close to passing before. When Senators and Congressmen have no alternative but to live within their means, like so many of our States, they will figure out a way to do it. But if Congress is not required by the Constitution to